

Report of the Budget Scrutiny Task & Finish Group

Published: February 2020

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Introduction

- The Shadow Overview and Scrutiny Committee delegated the responsibility for scrutinising the budget to a cross-party Budget Scrutiny Task & Finish Group.
- The Shadow Executive agreed the draft budget at its meeting on 7th January 2020.
- Budget Scrutiny meetings were held on 14th, 15th, 16th and 17th January 2020 to scrutinise the draft budget by questioning each Shadow Portfolio Holder on their budget proposals.
- The public were able to submit questions via email or twitter.
- This report of the Budget Scrutiny Task & Finish Group makes recommendations to the Shadow Executive. The Shadow Executive will respond to these recommendations on 18th February 2020.
- The final budget will be presented to the Shadow Authority at its meeting on 27th February 2020.
- The Budget Scrutiny meetings were webcast and can be viewed at <https://shadow-buckinghamshire.public-i.tv/core/portal/webcasts>

Membership of the Budget Scrutiny Task & Finish Group

- Cllr John Gladwin, Chairman
- Cllr Chris Whitehead, Vice-Chairman
- Cllr Ralph Bagge
- Cllr Lesley Clarke OBE
- Cllr Alex Collingwood
- Cllr Peter Cooper
- Cllr Christopher Ford
- Cllr Guy Hollis
- Cllr Steven Lambert
- Cllr Richard Newcombe
- Cllr Paul Turner

Executive Summary

- The Budget Scrutiny Group recognise that this is a unique budget to ensure a smooth transition from five Councils in Bucks to one new unitary council from 1st April 2020. Buckinghamshire Council will have a gross budget of £1.2bn and a net operating budget of £435m.
- There has only been a short period of time for transition and we recognise the hard work of members and officers in preparing for this change. This budget is a consolidation of the 5 Council's existing financial plans and whilst the first year has been robustly tested, it was acknowledged that more work will be needed on Years 2 & 3 following elections to Buckinghamshire Council in May 2020.
- Whilst we acknowledge that the Leader and Portfolio Holders may be different after May 2020, the Shadow Authority should provide a clear direction to Buckinghamshire Council and must agree a balanced budget on its behalf.
- We appreciate there is much uncertainty for staff but we welcome the enthusiasm of officers we met who are proactively seeking out new opportunities available as a Unitary, to work more effectively and improve outcomes for Bucks residents.

Recommendations

The Budget Scrutiny Task & Finish Group recommend that:

Recommendation 1 –

- a) There should be a consistent approach to how inflation and salary increases are applied across the budget.
- b) Where budgets include monies released from a reserve, this should be clearly noted in a separate budget line.
- c) Further work should be undertaken on Years 2 & 3 of the MTFP to ensure the robustness of the budgets in light of a number of external factors which are outside of the Council's control.

Recommendation 2- The Corporate Plan for Buckinghamshire Council should include a stronger commitment to Climate Change, with the aim of the Council being net Carbon Neutral by 2035(subject to consideration of the results of the Council's Carbon Audit) and the County generally by 2050. This commitment should be explicit and transparent and will require strong political leadership to ensure delivery.

Recommendations

Recommendation 3 - The budget should include specific budget lines which demonstrate how it will deliver the Council being net Carbon Neutral by 2035.

Recommendation 4 - A specific Portfolio and Portfolio Holder should be nominated to be responsible for driving the Climate Change & Carbon Neutral agenda forward across Buckinghamshire Council and to take a leading role in championing this across the County and beyond.

Recommendation 5 – An overall recruitment and workforce strategy for Buckinghamshire Council as a whole should be developed as a priority.

Recommendation 6 – A strategy to reduce the number of agency staff should also be prioritised. The delivery & performance of this strategy should be monitored regularly.

Recommendation 7 – Buckinghamshire Council should ensure that there is sufficient capacity to deliver existing savings plans and an ambitious capital programme, as well as managing far-reaching service transformation.

Recommendations

Recommendation 8 – Buckinghamshire Council should invest in Key Worker Housing as a priority, to aid recruitment, reduce staff turnover and unlock additional skills capacity in the County.

Recommendation 9- A robust centralised management system is put in place to manage all Developer Contributions across the County, including CIL, S106 and S278 monies which are so integral to successful delivery of the Capital programme.

Recommendation 10- Risks around funding bids from Housing Infrastructure Fund and other government bodies are acknowledged and implications on cash flow/borrowing/interest and the timing of building projects should be clearly identified.

Recommendation 11- Capital programme should be divided into those schemes which are fully funded, with deliverable business cases and those that are more aspirational, in order to give members and residents a clearer understanding of the programme. This detail should be included in the final budget.

Recommendation 12– A detailed breakdown of the funding for each Community Board should be included in the final budget.

Recommendations

Recommendation 13– Responsibility for Community Boards and the associated budgets should sit with the Communities Portfolio to drive Localism forward and have visibility of community grants and support in one place.

Recommendation 14 – Increased funding for feasibility work in years 2 & 3 should be investigated to reflect the quantum of Capital projects (£493m over 3 years)

Recommendation 15 – The balance of the Unitary Implementation transition fund should be added to the £14m transformation pot.

Recommendation 16 – Further assessment should be made during 2020-21 as to whether the £14m Transformation Pot will be sufficient to enable the required service transformation over the 3 year period of the MTFP.

Recommendation 17 – As soon as plans are finalised for the priority order of service transformation, these should be shared with all staff to enable them to understand the implications for them as individuals over the next 3 years.

Recommendation 18 - A robust and clearly understood approach to risk management be adopted by Buckinghamshire Council as a priority.

Recommendations

Recommendation 19– The option of the Home to School Transport team being integrated in the Education service and the Client Transport team being integrated in Adult Social Care, to realise savings and improve outcomes for residents should be explored.

Recommendation 20 - A management reporting system should be established which enables a true comparison of costs and key performance indicators, in particular the quality of service, between in-house and contracted services on a like-for-like basis to support Buckinghamshire Council's future decision-making.

Recommendation 21 – Priority should be given to the recruitment of experienced staff to support the Planning service in dealing with increased demand and Members would recommend that a 'Grow your Own' programme such as those in Social Care should be investigated.

Recommendation 22 - Additional funding should be set aside for the Local Plan reserve as £3m over the next three years is likely to be inadequate.

Recommendation 23 – When the Planning Service is reviewed, adequate resources should be allocated to enable an effective and timely response to planning enforcement issues.

Recommendations

Recommendation 24 – Development of a parking strategy, including how to increase capacity, should be a matter of priority for Buckinghamshire Council after the elections in May 2020.

Recommendation 25 – A review should be undertaken ahead of the parking enforcement procurement, to investigate how the Council's on street and off street parking enforcement can be integrated to deliver an improved service and to review future requirements in light of the new parking strategy, to ensure quality service delivery and value for money.

Recommendation 26 – During 2020-21, as Community Access Points are reviewed, consideration should be given to their future funding.

Recommendation 27 – There should be continued investment in the Social Work Academy, which utilises the apprenticeship levy and will provide more stability in the Adult Social Care workforce and positive outcomes for clients.

Recommendation 28 - There should be further investment in the ASYE Academy to enable Children's Services to recruit and retain more qualified staff, which will stabilise the workforce and lead to improved outcomes for children and families. In turn, this should also support the pace of change required for Ofsted Improvement.

Recommendations

Recommendation 29 – A specific line should be included in the budget for Special Expenses.

Recommendation 30 - Voluntary sector organisations which provide vital community services at minimal cost should be nurtured and a full review carried out to establish how they have been funded to date and how grants and other funding from Buckinghamshire Council should be offered going forward to deliver improved outcomes for residents.

Recommendation 31 – A strategy for Homelessness and Rough Sleeping should be developed as a priority for Buckinghamshire Council.

Recommendation 32 - A consistent approach to licensing for HMOs and Taxis should be applied across the County as soon as practicable after 1st April 2020.

Recommendation 33 – The evaluation of the Wycombe Street Warden scheme, should be reported to the new Cabinet as part of a wider review of Community Safety/Anti-Social Behaviour.

National Context

Local Government Settlement

- Council Tax Referendum Limit remains at 2%
- Adult Social Care Precept of 2% to be added to Council Tax meaning overall proposed increase of 3.99% for residents
- Negative Revenue Support Grant removed for 2020/21 meaning Buckinghamshire Council can retain an additional £13.360m
- New Social Care Grant* in 2020/21 = £5.919m additional funding
- One-off Funding from 2019/20 rolled forward* (Winter Pressures Grant = £1.671m, Social Care Support Grant = £2.855m)
- Government has also announced additional Pot Hole Funding (Total £500m p.a.) – allocations to be announced in early 2020

*Where additional funding is available for one year only, this is built into contingencies or used for one off projects, rather than being included in the base revenue budget.

National Context

- Local Government continues to face significant financial challenges as Government funding is withdrawn and increased demand pressures in Adult Social Care, Children's Services and Special Educational Needs and Disabilities are being seen nationally.
- A report published by the New Economics Foundation and the TUC in September 2019 predicts an overall funding gap of over £25bn in real terms by 2024-25, if Council's wanted to maintain the level and quality of services which were delivered in 2009-10.
- A Green Paper on Adult Social Care has still to come forward and whilst many NHS Trusts are also struggling financially, Local Government is working hard to bridge the gap.
- Some local authorities have been unable to manage the pressures, e.g Northamptonshire County Council was no longer financially viable and has been divided into two unitary councils which will come into existence in April 2021.

Local Context

- In 2016, Unitary Business Cases were submitted to Government by both the County Council and the District Councils within Buckinghamshire. Both Business Cases proposed that financial savings could be achieved by the creation of Unitary Councils.
- The decision from Government took some time, but on 1st November 2018 it was announced that a Unitary Council would be created to cover the whole geographical area of Buckinghamshire (excluding Milton Keynes).
- The Structural Changes Order passed through Parliament on 23rd May 2019. This established a Shadow Authority and a Shadow Executive to oversee the transition and set a vesting day of 1st April 2020. This would be particularly challenging as most recent unitary transitions have been over a two year period and in Buckinghamshire, the order did not allow for a continuing authority.

Overall Budget

- The Budget Scrutiny Group spent an intense four days scrutinising the Draft Budget for 2020-21 and the Medium Term Financial Plan to 2022-23. All Shadow Portfolio Holders were questioned in turn and the Budget Group's observations and recommendations are set out in this report.
- Many of the observations and recommendations are specific to individual portfolio areas, but we begin with a number of cross-cutting or corporate recommendations.

Presentation of the Revenue Budget

- Members acknowledge that this is a consolidated budget, pulling together existing plans from the five legacy Councils and includes proposals for transformation savings and efficiencies, whilst at the same time recognising that the newly elected Buckinghamshire Council may choose to set different priorities in the future.
- Members are aware that the final budget must ensure that the new authority will be financially viable, yet also allow the Council to be ambitious in its approach to harmonising and improving council services.

Overall Budget

- ***The Unitary Business case suggested that £18.2m of savings could be delivered. It is important that savings realised through the Unitary transformation can be clearly demonstrated and tracked in the presentation of the revenue budget in future. Members believe that sustained political will is vital to deliver these savings.***
- The Budget Scrutiny Group appreciate that the draft Budget had to be developed relatively quickly and the different councils managed and presented their budgets in a variety of ways. Whilst they found the specific Portfolio Information very helpful, in order to improve clarity and transparency in the budget figures, Members recommend the following:

Recommendation 1 –

- a) There should be a consistent approach to how inflation and salary increases are applied across the budget.**
- b) Where budgets include monies released from a reserve, this should be clearly noted in a separate budget line.**
- c) Further work should be undertaken on Years 2 & 3 of the MTFP to ensure the robustness of the budgets in light of a number of external factors which are outside of the Council's control.**

Overall Budget

Council Tax Harmonisation

- The Budget Scrutiny Group questioned the Leader about the options which had been considered with regards to Council Tax Harmonisation for Buckinghamshire Council. It was noted that the Shadow Executive's preferred option of harmonising at a 'weighted average' level would result in a higher increase for residents in the Wycombe district.
- Once harmonised, Council Tax will then be increased by 3.99% (incl ASC precept). The impact on the average Band D property in 2020/21 within each district area is as follows:-
 - Aylesbury = £55.61 (3.72%)
 - Chiltern = £34.93 (2.30%)
 - South Bucks = £58.23 (3.90%)
 - Wycombe = £80.17 (5.45%)
- A minority of members would like to have seen a different approach taken to Council Tax Harmonisation. Whilst the Budget Scrutiny Group understand the rationale behind this decision, it is vital that this is communicated to residents in an open and transparent manner to ensure that everyone has a clear understanding of the impact this change will have on their own council tax payments.

Overall Budget

Climate Change

- The Budget Scrutiny Group recognise that tackling Climate Change is now a top priority for residents, who regard this as an emergency rather than afterthought. This should be reflected strongly in the Buckinghamshire Council's Corporate Plan and backed up with budget commitments.
- A figure of £50m across all Council portfolios was mentioned as being invested in Green/Environmental projects, but this was not explicit in the draft budget. Whilst individual projects or initiatives were discussed with Portfolio Holders, there was not sufficient evidence of a necessary focus on carbon reduction, given the 2050 Carbon Zero commitment.
- Members welcome the news that a Carbon audit will be undertaken imminently, establishing essential baseline data for Buckinghamshire Council against which future carbon reductions can be measured.

Recommendation 2- The Corporate Plan for Buckinghamshire Council should include a stronger commitment to Climate Change, with the aim of the Council being net Carbon Neutral by 2035(subject to consideration of the results of the Council's Carbon Audit) and the County generally by 2050. This commitment should be explicit and transparent and will require strong political leadership to ensure delivery.

Recommendation 3 - The budget should include specific budget lines which demonstrate how it will deliver the Council being net Carbon Neutral by 2035.

Overall Budget

Recommendation 4 - A specific Portfolio and Portfolio Holder should be nominated to be responsible for driving the Climate Change & Carbon Neutral agenda forward across Buckinghamshire Council and to take a leading role in championing this across the County and beyond.

- Whilst there must be someone to take the lead, the Council as a whole should be demonstrating commitment to this aim. With this in mind, Members suggest that opportunities to encourage sustainable transport methods with Council contractors should be fully explored – e.g. by specifying the use of electric or hybrid vehicles for home to school transport or client transport contracts.

Members welcome the allocation of a £5m fund for Corporate Priorities, which could provide the new Council with an opportunity to invest and make a material difference to residents in it's first year of operation.

Potential areas could include Carbon Neutral initiatives, Key Worker Housing, additional investment in footway maintenance.

Overall Budget

Capacity, Skills and Recruitment

- Members heard of significant recruitment difficulties and a reliance on agency staff across the whole Council, but particularly in Adult and Children's Social Care and Planning. Whilst Members support the individual recruitment initiatives in different service areas, especially the 'grow your own' programmes in Social Care, it was felt that an overall recruitment and workforce strategy for Buckinghamshire Council should be developed as a priority.

Recommendation 5 – An overall recruitment and workforce strategy for Buckinghamshire Council as a whole should be developed as a priority.

Recommendation 6 – A strategy to reduce the number of agency staff should also be prioritised. The delivery & performance of this strategy should be monitored regularly.

Recommendation 7 - Buckinghamshire Council should ensure that there is sufficient capacity to deliver existing savings plans and an ambitious capital programme, as well as managing far-reaching service transformation.

Overall Budget

Capacity, Skills and Recruitment continued

- Several Portfolio Holders and their teams mentioned the potential for Buckinghamshire Council to develop Key Worker Housing as a method of boosting current recruitment initiatives. This would be particularly helpful in the most problematic areas of Planning, Adult Social Care and Children's Services, where a national skills shortage has created an increasingly competitive recruitment marketplace.
- Members believe that Buckinghamshire Council has a great opportunity to invest in Key Worker Housing and would encourage the Senior Management team to proactively support this cross-cutting initiative.

Recommendation 8 – Buckinghamshire Council should invest in Key Worker Housing as a priority, to aid recruitment, reduce staff turnover and unlock additional skills capacity in the County.

Overall Budget

Capital Programme

- The Budget Scrutiny Group view this a very ambitious Capital programme especially in Year 1, but recognise this is due to many existing Capital projects being carried forward. It will be challenging to deliver in terms of securing funding and having sufficient staff with necessary expertise to oversee the delivery of complex projects.
- **Recommendation 9- A robust centralised management system is put in place to manage all Developer Contributions across the County, including CIL, S106 and S278 monies which are so integral to successful delivery of the Capital programme.**
- **Recommendation 10- Risks around funding bids from Housing Infrastructure Fund and other government bodies are acknowledged and implications on cash flow/borrowing/interest and the timing of building projects should be clearly identified.**
- **Recommendation 11- Capital programme should be divided into those schemes which are fully funded, with deliverable business cases and those that are more aspirational, in order to give members and residents a clearer understanding of the programme. This detail should be included in the final budget.**

Leader

Community Boards

- Members welcome the substantial budget of £5m available for Community Boards to fund initiatives which are identified as priorities in a local area.
- However with no clear indication of how this funding would be allocated across the 16 Community Boards, it is difficult for Members to take a view as to the robustness of the total budget and whether the funding for each Board will be sufficient and appropriate for the community's requirements in each locality.

Recommendation 12– A detailed breakdown of the funding for each Community Board should be included in the final budget.

- The Budget Scrutiny Group had several discussions around exactly how the Community Boards will work, as they are central to Buckinghamshire Council's Localism agenda - an integral part of the Unitary Business case.

Recommendation 13– Responsibility for Community Boards and the associated budgets should sit with the Communities Portfolio to drive Localism forward and have visibility of community grants and support in one place.

Leader

Feasibility Funding

- It was noted that the Leader's Revenue Budget included a proposal to increase feasibility funding by £200k, to bring the annual base budget to £1.2m. In addition there is a reserve of £4.4m. Members agreed that funding for feasibility work is often overlooked when Capital projects are planned. Due to the ambitious nature of the Capital Programme, Members feel this is insufficient.

Recommendation 14 – Increased funding for feasibility work in years 2 & 3 should be investigated to reflect the quantum of Capital projects (£493m over 3 years)

Transition Budget

- Members noted that Unitary Implementation had been allocated funding of £22m in 2019-20 and a further £14m has been set aside in reserves to support further service transformation going forward.

Recommendation 15 – The balance of the Unitary Implementation transition fund should be added to the £14m transformation pot.

Deputy Leader & Resources

- This portfolio has a total spend of £185m and generates an income of £150m, although £122m is housing benefit which is 'passported' through the Revenue and Benefits service.
- Key financial risks highlighted include staffing pressures and possible loss of rental income due to property voids and delayed developments.

Capital

- It was noted that there is £13m in the draft Capital Programme which are existing commitments for ICT improvements, property maintenance and specific property improvement projects to be delivered over the next 3 years.

Capacity & Skills

- Although raised earlier as a corporate issue, members were particularly concerned about capacity and skills in this portfolio, as the back office services will lead and support the Council through the Unitary transformation.
- HR will be managing over 30 sets of terms and conditions, advising staff during service transformation and embedding a new culture. Finance will be consolidating onto one new system and unfamiliar budget management processes and Procurement will have a significant number of large contract renewals to manage in a short space of time. It is important that ICT works reliably from Day 1 and Property have stretching income targets to deliver.

Deputy Leader & Resources

Recommendation 16 – Further assessment should be made during 2020-21 as to whether the £14m Transformation Pot will be sufficient to enable the required service transformation over the 3 year period of the MTFP.

Service Transformation post-April 2020

- Members were advised that £1.7m of savings would be delivered on Day 1 of Buckinghamshire Council through the new Senior Management structure. Newly appointed managers are already developing plans to shape the transformation of services which will be staggered over a three year period.

Recommendation 17 – As soon as plans are finalised for the priority order of service transformation, these should be shared with all staff to enable them to understand the implications for them as individuals over the next 3 years.

Deputy Leader & Resources

Risk Management

- Members had concerns about the overall approach which was being taken towards Risk Management. Given the size and scale of the new Buckinghamshire Council, it is vital that risks are closely monitored and managed.

Recommendation 18 - A robust and clearly understood approach to risk management be adopted by Buckinghamshire Council as a priority.

Property

- Members were pleased to know that a detailed audit of all Council's assets had been undertaken and Buckinghamshire Council would have an asset base valued at approx. £1.2bn. Whilst this presents many opportunities for the future, Members were conscious that the Property team has challenging income targets and would like to be assured that property disposal would not become the default position.

Members expect to see a detailed Strategic Asset Management Strategy being published, alongside a Capital & Investment Strategy by April 2021.

Education

- This portfolio has a total spend of £503million, of which £472.2m is a grant from the Department of Education, which is 'passport' directly to schools across the county.
- The remaining £24m is mainly spent on Home to School Transport and additional services for children with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND). Increased demand in both these areas had placed significant pressure on existing budgets and these were identified as key areas of risk in the draft budget.
- Whilst additional funding allocated for SEND from Government in the spending round for the 2020-21 was welcome, it was recognised that consistent long term funding was necessary to meet demand.

Capital

- £108m in the draft Capital Programme , primarily to create new Primary and Secondary school places and for school maintenance projects.

Members noted that regular review of the demand for school places and also re-profiling of capital spend would be necessary to ensure that the Council can deliver this statutory responsibility.

Education

Early Years

- It was recognised that it is important to invest in children's Early Years as this could drastically improve outcomes for individuals, thereby saving money for the Council in the longer term.
- Members therefore advocate a more active promotion of the availability of free early education for 3 and 4 years olds across the County, as data showed that Buckinghamshire has a low percentage take up in comparison with other Councils. The new Community Access Points could be utilised to support this work.

Home to School Transport

- Budget Scrutiny were concerned to hear evidence of silo working, in that the budget and staff who understood the client's needs are based in Education, but Transportation staff commission the service. Members felt that the new Council could offer an opportunity to streamline the process.

Recommendation 19– The option of the Home to School Transport team being integrated in the Education service and the Client Transport team being integrated in Adult Social Care, to realise savings and improve outcomes for residents should be explored.

Environment

- This portfolio has a total spend of almost £33m, of which £29m is associated with waste collection and disposal. The portfolio also generates circa £8m of income through fees and charges and the sale of electricity generated from the Energy from Waste plant at Greatmoor.
- Main areas of financial risk highlighted include - budget pressures from the new Southern Waste Contract; pressures on waste budget generally from increased volumes of waste, housing growth and volatile recyclable market; harmonisation of fees and charges and possible regulatory changes following publication of the Defra Resources and Waste Strategy.

Capital

- £30m in the draft Capital Programme, - mainly for purchase of Waste Collection vehicles for the new Southern Waste Contract, investment in a Biowaste treatment plant and a number of Flood Defence Schemes which attract match funding from the Environment Agency.

Environment

Southern Waste Contract

- Members discussed the budget implications of the new Southern Waste Contract which is currently out to tender. There was concern that having different arrangements for Waste collections in the North and South of the county could lead to disparity of service and costs, particularly as one service is in-house and the other would be contracted out.

Recommendation 20 - A management reporting system should be established which enables a true comparison of costs and key performance indicators, in particular the quality of service, between in-house and contracted services on a like-for-like basis to support Buckinghamshire Council's future decision-making.

- The costs in the draft Capital Programme for new vehicles appears high and the Budget Scrutiny Group would like this figure to be reviewed.
- Members would support a vigorous promotional campaign to encourage the recycling rate in the county up to 60%, as this supports the climate change agenda and would also increase capacity and the income generation potential of the Energy from Waste plant.

Planning

- This portfolio has a total spend of £15.4m, the majority of which is accounted for by staff costs. However this is offset by income of £11.8m generated through fees and charges.
- Main areas of financial risk highlighted include – stretching income targets; delivery of existing saving plans; staff recruitment and retention and balancing the challenges of national infrastructure projects, housing growth, Aylesbury Garden Town and development of a new Local Plan for the whole Buckinghamshire Council area.
- Members quickly identified issues of staff capacity, as recruitment and retention had already proved difficult this year and there is a national skills shortage in both planning and building control.
- Budget pressures were evident in this financial year due to a backlog of applications and income targets not being met - existing mitigation plans appear ambitious/optimistic. Whilst the new Service Director is very confident about building a strong performing team, Members remained concerned about the risks associated with the combination of demands in Planning, as outlined above.

Planning

- Members were also not convinced that the draft budget included sufficient resources dedicated to planning enforcement, which is particularly valued by residents.

Members would also encourage a more proactive approach to realising income opportunities from Building Control advice.

Recommendation 21 – Priority should be given to the recruitment of experienced staff to support the Planning service in dealing with increased demand and Members would recommend that a ‘Grow your Own’ programme such as those in Social Care should be investigated.

Recommendation 22 - Additional funding should be set aside for the Local Plan reserve as £3m over the next three years is likely to be inadequate.

Recommendation 23 – When the Planning Service is reviewed, adequate resources should be allocated to enable an effective and timely response to planning enforcement issues.

Transportation

- The Transportation portfolio has a total spend of £41.8m, whilst generating income of £16.2m, predominantly through car parking charges. It was noted that almost £23m of this expenditure is via the Transport for Buckinghamshire highways maintenance contract.
- Key financial risks highlighted include – impact of winter weather on road condition; Impact on income and parking supply next year if the parking strategy and renewal of the parking contract is delayed; inflationary pressures around fuel etc and issues with capital projects, which are often complex by nature.
- It was also noted that Buckinghamshire has the smallest road network of any English council but one of the highest traffic volumes.

Capital

- £94.5m proposed in draft Capital programme over 3 years, with a significant amount of £21.5m proposed annually for maintenance of footways, highways and associated infrastructure e.g. bridges, street lighting and traffic signals.

Transportation

- The Budget Scrutiny Group had a lengthy discussion with the Portfolio Holder and his team regarding the development of a Parking Strategy for Buckinghamshire and the renewal of the parking enforcement contract which is due in 2021. Apart from the opportunities to influence the local economy, traffic movements and increase parking capacity, considerable amounts of income included in the budget are predicated on setting the right strategy.

Recommendation 24 – Development of a parking strategy, including how to increase capacity, should be a matter of priority for Buckinghamshire Council after the elections in May 2020.

Recommendation 25 – A review should be undertaken ahead of the parking enforcement procurement, to investigate how the Council's on street and off street parking enforcement can be integrated to deliver an improved service and to review future requirements in light of the new parking strategy, to ensure quality service delivery and value for money.

Members noted that the £315m contract with Ringway Jacobs would shortly be up for renewal and would like assurances that an objective and professional team will lead the procurement exercise to ensure that the best possible contract terms are secured and that the new contract would be signed off by Cabinet.

Health & Culture

- This wide-ranging portfolio has a total spend of £31m, of which almost £20m is funded by a ring-fenced grant for Public Health activities. Country Parks, libraries and leisure centres all contribute a further income of approx £4m.
- It is recognised that Health & Culture services can potentially reduce spend in other service areas, such as Adult Social Care.
- Main areas of financial risks highlighted include – potential changes to the Public Health grant which could confer additional responsibilities on the Council without a commensurate increase in funding and risks of non-delivery of savings or anticipated increases in income from the Chiltern Lifestyle Centre.

Capital

- Proposals in Capital Programme of £39m over the next 3 years, including £36m on new Chiltern Lifestyles centre, improvements to Chesham and Chalfont's leisure centres and investment of £1.5m in a new Visitors Centre at Black Park, to attract more visitors during the winter months.

Health & Culture

- It is acknowledged that on the whole Public Health in Buckinghamshire performs well, but the cumulative percentage of eligible 40-74 year olds offered an NHS health check who actually attended, remained low. This was also noted by members last year who hoped to see increased engagement with GPs and larger employers to increase reach for the health checks. Perhaps going forward, Community Access Points across the County could be offered as possible venues for this service.
- A number of libraries will be expanding their role in local communities by acting as new Council Access Points, but there was no obvious funding in the budget to either support revisions to existing buildings or to enable an extension of opening hours, particularly at weekends.

Recommendation 26 – During 2020-21, as Community Access Points are reviewed, consideration should be given to their future funding.

- Members noted that a number of Leisure contracts are due for renewal in the first 2-3 years of Buckinghamshire Council , which presents a good opportunity to consolidate and increase value for money

Adult Social Care

- This portfolio has a total spend of £190m, offset by an income of £43m, which represents 43% of the total Council spend in 2020-21. It was recognised that relatively small percentage overspends would mean budget pressure in the millions, not thousands.
- Adult Social Care is in crisis nationally and the absence of a long term funding solution makes budget planning very challenging. Key financial risks outlined include - increasing demand, due to demography and complexity of need; staff recruitment and retention and instability of the market, with recent examples of national care providers failing.
- The Committee noted that the new Government has undertaken to *'fix the crisis in social care once and for all, and with a clear plan we have prepared, we will give every older person the dignity and security they deserve.'*

Capital

- Adult Social Care has £2.9m in the Capital programme which has been deferred to 2021-22. This investment is for a proposed purpose-built respite care facility on the site of the current Aylesbury Day Opportunities Centre, to replace existing facilities at Seeley's House in Beaconsfield. This project would be jointly funded with Health.

Adult Social Care

Staff Recruitment & Retention

- A national shortage of qualified social workers leads to competition for staff. Currently 9% of Adult Social Workers at the Council are agency staff and there is a staff turnover rate of 20%. Agency staff costs will be £2.1m in 2019-20.
- There is also concern about the current 50:50 ratio of qualified and unqualified Social Work staff. The service would like to achieve a 70:30 split and are working closely with local universities to promote Social Work as a career. Members were pleased to hear that a 'Grow your Own' programme has been introduced, where Social Work Assistants are sponsored by the Council to become fully qualified. A cohort of 10 will begin their course in Apr 2020.

Recommendation 27 – There should be continued investment in the Social Work Academy, which utilises the apprenticeship levy and will provide more stability in the Adult Social Care workforce and positive outcomes for clients.

Adult Social Care

- It was recognised that the cost of housing in Buckinghamshire might also impact on recruitment and Members commend the Portfolio Holder and her team who are keen to explore opportunities to work more closely with colleagues in Property and Housing to develop Key Worker housing and also bespoke housing for Adult Social Care clients, e.g. supported living arrangements for people with learning disabilities. ***(Please see earlier Recommendation)***

Integration with Health

- It was also noted that the continued integration of Health and Social Care is key to increasing efficiency, reducing duplication and costs and also improving outcomes for residents.

Market Instability

- Risks around provider failure were noted but Members were reassured that the service works closely with its largest providers through open book accounting and quality inspections and has a provider failure plan in place. There are also significant contingencies held centrally for Adult Social Care which could be accessed in this scenario.

Children's Services

- Children's Services has a total spend of almost £75m with grant contributions income of just under £1m. Children's Services in Buckinghamshire is on an Ofsted Improvement journey and has received additional investment in its budget to support this transformation work.
- Significant financial risk areas highlighted include increasing client costs due to the complexity of need and staff recruitment and retention, where the service faces similar issues to Adult Social Care in attracting qualified Social Workers.

Client Costs

- Additional investment of £1.1m is proposed in the draft budget to support pressures in client costs. Members also welcome the commitment to both the Placement Sufficiency Strategy and Early Help as methods of managing demand and reducing placement costs.

The increased number of in-house foster carers is particularly commended and again it is recognised that early intervention can prevent families descending into crisis, improving outcomes for children and reducing demand for social care.

Children's Services

Staff Recruitment and Retention

- Children's Services has been reliant on the use of agency Social Workers, due to a shortage of skilled staff nationally. Currently agency staff account for approximately 30% of qualified Social Workers and whilst several initiatives to increase permanent recruitment have been introduced their impact will not be immediate.
- Members were pleased to hear about the success of the Assessed & Supported Year in Employment (ASYE) Academy, which takes newly qualified Social Workers through a 12 month programme where they are mentored and supported with taking on casework. In this way Children's Services can 'grow their own' staff and by offering a dynamic but supportive work environment with clear career development opportunities, hopefully also retain staff for longer.

Recommendation 28 - There should be further investment in the ASYE Academy to enable Children's Services to recruit and retain more qualified staff, which will stabilise the workforce and lead to improved outcomes for children and families. In turn, this should also support the pace of change required for Ofsted Improvement.

Children's Services

Unitary Opportunities

- The Budget Scrutiny Group were pleased to see evidence of Portfolio teams seizing opportunities for closer collaboration with colleagues following Unitary transition. Children's Services is working with Adult Social Care on a new Transitions programme called 'Preparing for Adulthood' and Members were also noted that opportunities for both Key Worker housing and Supported Living accommodation for Care Leavers were being investigated with colleagues in Housing and Property. ***(Please see earlier Recommendation)***

Ofsted Improvement Journey

- Members paid tribute to the hard work of all staff in Children's Services and the improvements that had been made in the last three years. Senior Managers were confident that their recruitment strategy would be successful which would contribute to sustaining the pace of change that Ofsted required.

The Budget Scrutiny Group hope to see continued improvement in Children's Services and recommend that a detailed report on progress to date should be presented at an early meeting of Buckinghamshire Council to ensure that all new members will understand and support this journey.

Communities

- Communities is a relatively small portfolio responsible for a wide-range of services including Housing, Regulatory services and Localities and Strategic Partnerships. The total spend of £20.3 m is offset by income of £10m, made up of fees and charges and grant income.
- Main financial risks are associated with possible regulatory changes and risks to Prevent and other grant funding.

Capital

- Communities has £29m in the draft Capital Programme across the next 3 years. £8.6m is for Temporary Accommodation and a further £8.4m for Affordable Housing and Enabling schemes. Disabled Facility Grants to adapt homes to meet residents' changing needs accounts for £6.4m and £5.4m is to be invested in Cemeteries and Crematoria.

Special Expenses

- Members noted that some cemeteries and community centres included in the portfolio had traditionally been funded by special expenses.

Recommendation 29 – A specific line should be included in the budget for Special Expenses.

Communities

Partnership Working

- The Portfolio Holder reminded Members that Communities relied on successful partnership working, e.g. with Police, Health & the Voluntary sector. With this in mind, the Budget Scrutiny Group raised concerns about ongoing funding for voluntary organisations, who currently received grant funding from any of the five existing Councils and were unsure if this would continue after April 2020.
- Members noted that around 75 larger organisations currently benefitted from grants and it was recognised that a relatively modest investment from the Council could leverage much more in terms of outcomes for residents via this route. A report was being drafted for the Shadow Executive to confirm the approach for the next financial year and beyond.

Recommendation 30 - Voluntary sector organisations which provide vital community services at minimal cost should be nurtured and a full review carried out to establish how they have been funded to date and how grants and other funding from Buckinghamshire Council should be offered going forward to deliver improved outcomes for residents.

Communities

Housing & Homelessness

- Members agreed that the provision of affordable social housing in Buckinghamshire should be a priority and were pleased that the Capital budget included provision for such schemes, as well as temporary accommodation.
- It was recognised that homelessness and rough sleeping required a partnership approach.

Recommendation 31 – A strategy for Homelessness and Rough Sleeping should be developed as a priority for Buckinghamshire Council.

- It was noted that significant work had been undertaken in Wycombe in respect of licensing and inspection of Houses of Multiple Occupation (HMO) which had uncovered terrible conditions and in some cases led to criminal prosecution.

Recommendation 32 - A consistent approach to licensing for HMOs and Taxis should be applied across the County as soon as practicable after 1st April 2020.

Communities

Community Safety

- The Budget Scrutiny Group heard about the Street Warden scheme which was currently being piloted in the Wycombe area.

Recommendation 33 – The evaluation of the Wycombe Street Warden scheme, should be reported to the new Cabinet as part of a wider review of Community Safety/Anti-Social Behaviour.

